

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-14WASHINGTON POST
21 January 1984

Secrets and Censors in Government

SEN. CHARLES MATHIAS is trying to save the administration from its own worst instincts. When the president issued a directive last March that would have required lifetime prepublication clearance of speeches and writings of some government employees, the Maryland senator offered an amendment to the State Department authorization bill that put the plan on hold until April 15. Another part of the presidential directive, which would have greatly expanded the use of polygraph tests in the federal service, has been temporarily sidetracked by an amendment to a Defense Department bill. The good news is that the administration now appears to be willing to let Congress play a role in dealing with national security leaks; the bad news is that some of the legislative proposals quietly floated by acting assistant attorney general Richard Willard sound worse than the original directive.

The paranoia about leaks is preposterous in the first place. No one in the administration has cited any actual cases where national security has been jeopardized by a whistle-blower. Of course, scandal and stupidity have been exposed, bureaucrats have been embarrassed and, to be fair, some folks with an ax to grind have used well-placed leaks for personal reasons.

But it's all part of a free society, which can only be maintained if information flows freely between the government and the public. Far from conceding that the March directive was wrong in its conception, Mr. Willard now suggests "compromises" that involve stiff fines and administrative penalties against government employees who divulge material some other government employee thinks ought to be secret. As anyone who has ever worked in government can attest, this covers a lot of territory and tons of paper.

Mr. Willard maintains that new proposals he has discussed with congressional staff are simply talking points, offered without the imprimatur of the Justice Department or anyone in the administration. Perhaps he has offered this parade of horrors to demonstrate that the March directive is moderate in contrast. It won't work. The whole business of subjecting 2.5 million individuals to lie detector tests and imposing permanent censorship on officials—some of them political appointees—is wrongheaded. Junk the directive and suggested compromises. Let's return to a policy of prosecuting spies and traitors, trusting the loyalty and good sense of government employees and encouraging debate on all aspects of national policy.

STAT